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Washington, D.C. -- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent federal advisory body created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) to monitor religious freedom abuses abroad, today released its [2013 Annual Report](#). The Report highlights the status of religious freedom globally and identifies those governments that are the most egregious violators.

"The state of international religious freedom is increasingly dire due to the presence of forces that fuel instability. These forces include the rise of violent religious extremism coupled with the actions and inactions of governments. Extremists target religious minorities and dissenters from majority religious communities for violence, including physical assaults and even murder. Authoritarian governments also repress religious freedom through intricate webs of discriminatory rules, arbitrary requirements and draconian edicts," said Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF's Chair.

The 2013 Annual Report recommends that the Secretary of State re-designate the following eight nations as "countries of particular concern" or CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF finds that seven other countries meet the CPC threshold and should be so designated: Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

"The Annual Report ultimately is about people and how their governments treat them. Violations affect members of diverse religious communities around the world, be they Rohingya Muslims in Burma, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong in China, Baha'is in Iran, Ahmadis and Christians in Pakistan, or Muslims in Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan and in non-Muslim nations like Russia. We recommend that the White House adopt a whole-of-government strategy to guide U.S. religious freedom promotion and that Secretary of State Kerry promptly designate CPCs, before currently designated actions expire later this year," said Lantos Swett.

In Burma, ongoing political reforms have yet to significantly improve the situation for freedom of religion and belief. Sectarian violence and severe abuses of religious freedom and human dignity targeting ethnic minority Christians and Muslims continue to occur with impunity.

In Egypt, despite some progress during a turbulent political transition, the government has failed or been slow to protect from violence religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians. The government continues to prosecute, convict, and imprison individuals for "contempt" or "defamation" of religion, and the new constitution includes several problematic provisions relevant to religious freedom.

In both Pakistan and Nigeria, religious extremism and impunity have factored into unprecedented levels of violence that threaten the long-term viability of both nations. Targeted violence against Shi'i Muslims in Pakistan is pervasive, while repeated Boko Haram attacks in

Nigeria exacerbate sectarian tensions.

“Many of these countries top the U.S. foreign policy agenda, and religion is a core component in their makeup. Successful U.S. foreign policy recognizes the critical role religious freedom plays in each of these nations and prioritizes accordingly. Religious freedom is both a pivotal human right under international law and a key factor that helps determine whether a nation experiences stability or chaos,” said Lantos Swett.

USCIRF also announced the placement of eight nations on its Tier 2 List for 2013. The Tier 2 category replaces the Watch List designation USCIRF previously used. These nations are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos and Russia. USCIRF found the violations these governments engage in or tolerate are particularly severe, and meet at least one criterion, but not all, of IRFA’s three-fold “systematic, ongoing, egregious” CPC standard.

In Russia, religious freedom conditions suffered major setbacks in the context of growing human rights abuses. In Indonesia, the country’s rich tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism is seriously threatened by arrests of individuals the government considers religiously deviant and violence perpetrated by extremist groups. Federal and provincial officials, police, courts, and religious leaders often tolerate and abet the conduct of religious freedom abusers.

The USCIRF report also highlights the status of religious freedom in countries/regions that do not meet the Tier 1 (CPC) or Tier 2 threshold. These include: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus,

Ethiopia, Turkey, Venezuela and Western Europe. The Annual Report also addresses in-depth thematic issues: Constitutional Changes; Severe Religious Freedom Violations by Non-State Actors; Laws against Blasphemy and Defamation of Religions; Imprisonment of Conscientious Objectors; Legal Retreat from Religious Freedom in Post-Communist Countries; Kidnapping and Forced Religious De-Conversion in Japan; and Religious Freedom Issues in International Organizations.

## **ABOUT USCIRF**

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government advisory body with its commissioners appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in Congress. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires that the United States annually designate as CPCs countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. IRFA also tasks USCIRF with assessing conditions in these and other countries and making recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

In accordance with IRFA, USCIRF uses international standards, as found in UN conventions and declarations, for assessing religious freedom conditions.

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